

WASHINGTON (4 Oct.) -- U.S. Rep. Gus M. Bilirakis (R-Fla.), member of the House Committee on Homeland Security and the Subcommittee on Border, Maritime, and Global Counterterrorism, today questioned Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials during a hearing on overseas counterterrorism coordination, about the security of visa issuance to foreigners seeking entry into the United States.

Bilirakis questioned DHS Assistant Secretary for International Affairs Marisa Lino, and Deputy Assistant Director for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Gary Cote, about a program that assigns DHS officers to overseas visa-issuing locations to enhance efforts to prevent terrorists, criminals, and other ineligible applicants from receiving U.S. visas.

"I am greatly concerned that visas only be issued to those who truly deserve them and that we ensure that visa holders are abiding by the terms of their entry into this country," Bilirakis said. "I believe that we must do a better job checking the backgrounds of those seeking to enter the United States and determining whether prospective visa holders are seeking temporary admission for the right reasons."

Congressman Bilirakis questioned the integrity of the international student visa system in particular during a hearing last month with Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff. During that hearing, Bilirakis cited the federal indictment of two University of South Florida (USF) students of Egyptian-origin on explosives charges, one of which was in the U.S. on a student visa despite reportedly having a criminal record in Egypt.

Bilirakis has since been briefed on the circumstances of the case surrounding the USF students by DHS officials. He is considering drafting legislation to strengthen existing visa security measures.